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Rains fall -- but not enough

Water-main break adds to state's woes

September 11, 2001

BY PEGGY WALSH-SARNECKI

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

There isn't enough water to go around these days in the Great Lakes state.

A broken water main left thousands of Macomb County residents without drinking water during the weekend.

And the nearly 1.5 inches of rainfall recorded at Metro Airport on Saturday and Sunday -- some areas received more -- weren't enough to have much of an effect on low water levels in the Great Lakes, said Adam Fox, hydrogeologist with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

"It certainly helps, but in the whole scheme of things I doubt we'll see a large increase in the Great Lakes water levels," Fox said Monday.

Lake St. Clair is currently 7 inches below its water level at this same time last year, according to the Army Corps' weekly water levels updates. Lakes Michigan and Huron are 3 inches below their level at this time last year, and Lake Erie is 11 inches below.

Inland lakes aren't as low as the Great Lakes. Oakland County Drain Commissioner John McCulloch regulates the largest of the county's 500 or so inland lakes' water levels through a series of pumps and dams. Those levels have been fairly constant from year to year and are down only about an inch below their target

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levels.

The National Weather Service is predicting average rainfalls for the fall, which would mean approximately 7.5 to 8 inches during September, October and November -- not enough to pump up the lakes, Fox said.

"If we get average precipitation in the fall, that won't be enough to make up much ground," Fox said. "During that time of year, the water levels naturally go through a decline."

The only hope is snow this winter, and plenty of it, he said.

In Macomb County, workers were hustling Monday to fix a water main. The 36-inch pipe on 24 Mile Road near Fairchild is the main water supply trunk for Chesterfield and Lenox townships, parts of Macomb Township and the city of New Haven.

Macomb County residents in that area have been drinking bottled water or boiling water since the water main burst Saturday afternoon.

The weekend's storms put the water main repair a little behind schedule, but Detroit Water and Sewerage Department officials expected the pipe to be fixed by late Monday. The City of Detroit owns the pipe.

But that won't mean residents can go back to regular tap water, said James Heath, assistant director of water operations. The new pipe must be chlorinated, flushed and then two water samples must be taken 24 hours apart before it will be safe for drinking without boiling, Heath said.

There's no word on why the pipe burst. That pipe was installed in the mid-1970s, and a typical pipe will last about 75 years, Heath said.

"We'll take a look at it when we get it out of the ground," Heath said.

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writer Emilia Askari contributed to this report.

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